

# Toward a Queer Temporality of Hip Hop: An Annotated Playlist

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## An Annotated Playlist, With Noise

To ask questions of noise and culture is to already speak of hip hop. Noise studies often begins by distinguishing sound, music, and noise; the first is often defined scientifically as waves, while music is designated organized sound and noise is termed sound waves that are disorganized, unexpected, undesired, or difficult to make sense of. However, 'noise' is also a denotative value judgment applied to music. To 'queer' noise also asks us to articulate the political uses to which 'noise' has been put in a history of popular musical production. In his *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali calls for attention to the way "material production has been supplanted by the exchange of signs" (4); it is easy to think of the recording industry in the U.S. 20<sup>th</sup> century, which shows that material production has always been an exchange of signs, particularly for Black American musicians categorized as race records or black music, because of the color of their skin rather than because of any generic distinction in their music (Garafalo 124). Contemporary sound studies scholars like John Corbett and Richard Leppert point to hip hop and Black American music as evidence of the revolutionary or redemptive possibilities of popular music; they see hip hop as music that self-proclaims and is labeled noise. In what follows, I attempt to move beyond the standard academic article into what I call an annotated playlist, using examples of music as evidence, in addition to scholarly work, to make my claims. I do this in part because the music shows clearly how hip hop complicates sexuality, temporality, and representations of bodies, but also as homage to a form relies on breaks and flows to emphasize what follows them. Ideally, this annotated playlist allows for co-temporal, multi-sensory analysis, as I hope my readers will listen along while they read, and form their own breaks and flows through my argument. I argue that hip hop occupies a vexed, contradictory position in both popular music and temporality: hip hop is held up as both the future of popular music and also unprogressive in its politics, while it also emphasizes a constant reiteration of the present while orienting itself as a future both mourning and celebrating its past. This queer temporality enables an affective reach from both past and future, an iterative reworking of sexual, racialized, and temporal themes.

Because hip hop is impossible to read outside of its cultural (read: racial and gendered and class) context, we can see how the application of the label “noise” to hip hop is already political. Hip hop music, broadly, is usually defined as music with voices calling or rhyming over polyrhythmic beats. “Rap,” calling over beats, is one aspect of the cultural movement of hip hop; DJing, creating the beats themselves, is another. Hip hop is often understood to hail back to Africanist roots, particularly because of this polyrhythmic emphasis (Osumare 44). It is within this context that Public Enemy’s 1988 album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* makes immediate sense: the second track, “Bring the Noise,” vies with their seventh, “Louder than a Bomb”, to describe both their aesthetic style and political ideals. “Bring the Noise”

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functions discursively to take back what mainstream U.S. culture named them pejoratively, self-labeling ‘noise’ as queer has been ‘taken back’ from pejorative use. Like the use of queer, ‘noise’ is still an insult, but after this album, it was also self-identification. Too, *It Takes a Nation* followed its own request to bring noise to rap; where previous hip hop hits had been relatively simple in sound, with few layers, Public Enemy layered beats, melodies, sirens and noises to emulate urban street sounds, and rapped over that.

## A Truncated History of Queer Black Music

Rap music, both as noise and as pop music, already haunts sound studies. Similarly, hip hop complicates temporality, insisting on questions of afterness and after-mortality. Hip hop, and Black American music more broadly, has already offered a history of queerness in pop music; to ignore this is to re-perform the reductive racial categorization the record industry has performed since its advent. Blues scholarship points to ways that the Blues, often hailed as the first Black American musical form, already ‘queer’ sound a little because, historically, blues musicians have played outside of social expectations and norms, in excess of them. Female blues artists, in particular, have used music to queer heteronormative ideals of sexuality (Carby). Ida Cox’s “One Hour Mama” (1939) is a very public denigration of male sexual prowess, while Gertrude “Ma” Rainey sings “Prove It On Me Blues”

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(1928) to show that while she “wear[s] a collar and a tie” and “talk[s] to the gals just like any old man,” folks are still going to have to “prove it on” her if they are going to accuse her of standing outside normative sexuality.

Contemporary Black American music shows a story that is shifting in terms of sexuality. Outside of the dominant narrative in which hip hop is inherently misogynistic and homophobic, Frank Ocean, Azealia Banks, and Big Freedia, among others, show how the malleability of

signifying in Black music allows space for queerness through ambivalence, polysemy and metaphor.<sup>[1]</sup> Thus, Frank Ocean's "Thinkin Bout You"

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begins with the weather-based signifyin' that permeates the history of blues music: he sings, "A tornado flew around my room / before you came / excuse the mess it made / it usually doesn't rain in / Southern California..." and while metaphor exists in much of music, Ocean hails a specific blues history that uses the weather and everyday life to point to, without explicitly articulating, romantic and social upheaval.<sup>[2]</sup> What this metaphorical signifyin' allows Ocean to do is speak to homosexuality through colloquialisms: "It usually doesn't rain in / Southern California / much like Arizona / my eyes don't shed tears, but, boy, they bawl when I'm thinkin' 'bout you". This "boy" gets read varyingly, in light of Ocean's July 2012 announcement of having fallen in love with a man.<sup>[3]</sup> "Boy" is both a direct object (boy, I am thinking about *you*) and also an interjection (*boy*, have I been thinking about the you that is addressed in this song). As such, for folks who are listening for it, Ocean is queer; for folks who aren't listening against the grain, boy, Frank Ocean is sad.

## Fetishization, Haunting, Afterness

However, I argue that hip hop presents queer possibilities beyond same sex relationships in the production of hip hop, for all that those are worth noting. Certainly, to queer noise and hip hop would necessarily point to the political uses to which 'noise' has been put in a history of popular musical production. Even Attali, who sets out to investigate noise, must first argue for the primacy of music, or noise that is given coded meaning, in cultural investigation. It is with this explicitly in mind that Corbett argues for noise as already marked as a lack, a lack which provides evidence for the fidelity of a particular recording technique. Corbett describes a "cultivation of lack itself; loving the gap; noise reduction; and consequently, fetishization of the technology that produces the lack" (89). In this small way, noise also points to its absence, to the technological ability to eradicate it but also to the power of the lack. Despite this fetishization of 'clean' sound, and also enabled by it, some records utilize the phonographic technique by which post-production introduces vinyl static back into the sound, using the lack of 'natural' static as an absent space into which to insert the familiar, and presumed more authentic, crackle of a record player.

The lack, the nostalgic absence, and afterness are crucial themes in hop hop. From Biggie's "Life After Death"

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to Tupac Shakur, for whom two thirds of his albums were released after his murder, the topics of living after poverty, death, and the afterlife, have been instrumental to defining hip hop from the early 90s onward. It is worth noting that hip hop's much celebrated first song, "Rapper's Delight,"

is party rap, intended to make people dance, but still includes reference both to having made it (“You see, I got more clothes than Muhammed Ali and I dress so viciously... I got a color TV, so I can see / the Knicks play basketball...”) and also to mortality (“there’s a time to laugh, a time to cry, a time to live, and a time to die...”). Hip hop’s emphasis on after-death as well as on after-success — having made it, in the past tense — queers temporality, forcing sound scholars to consider questions of afterness.

In his examination of eulogies of Tupac and Biggie, Barrett opens by saying “The dead body is one thing; the dead black body another” (306). It is not merely that the deaths of Tupac and Biggie, in September 1996 and March 1997 respectively, allow for a kind of eulogizing that “ascribes to young black men a seemingly inherent relation to violence” even while mourning that positionality (Barrett 306). It is also that what hip hop also does is emphasize the after-death, from Tupac and Biggie, as well as emphasizing after-success (having made it, in the past tense). To focus so explicitly on afterness provokes questions of mourning, much like Derrida’s hauntology, in a way that both takes up and also mirrors the temporalities of Christian theology. Hauntology, for Derrida, is an ontology of haunting, the work of mourning that traces the being of an absence, but the mark of that absent being, the specter (63). I offer that this relationship to temporality — to afterness, which is also a rejection of the present — is part what allows hip hop to seem to offer rebellion and change, even while hip hop is decried for being unprogressive.

For Derrida, mourning is both necessity and result of the hauntology of our present. Derrida’s articulation of the *revenant* as something that “[o]ne does not know if it is living or if it is dead,” although in true Derridean fashion, it appears to be both (5). The specter of the dead black body to which Barrett points, along with the question of is-it-dead-or-is-it-alive, is visible in the holographic representation of Tupac’s torso from the 2012 Coachella Music Festival.

The specter of Tupac’s body is made visible beginning with the top of his head, looking down, against a black background, but quickly refocuses to his torso, across which reads the identifying THUG LIFE tattoo. Juxtaposed with the glowing light of an ornate cross hanging from a necklace (Biggie’s Jesus-piece) and the glowing white of the figure’s underwear, markedly visible above the waist of his jeans, this Tupac-torso-spectre rocks back on his heels, nods, holds his arms up in anticipation of applause, and looks solemnly at the camera before he brings the mic to his lips and starts rapping. When he says “Yeah, you know what the fuck this is! What up, Dre?” he erases the unutterably jarring aspect of seeing a dead man come back to life. He also hails normalcy and familiarity - what up, Dre? - which is reinforced when Dre responds, What up, Pac?

This scene, in which a ghost and his old friend interact, could be that opening scene from Hamlet, in which the time is out of joint, and from which Derrida begins to formulate his theories of mourning. Mourning “consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by identifying the bodily remains...” (9). This identification — What up, Pac? — does not detract from the mourning process, or from Tupac being dead, any more than when Marcellus says, “Is it not like the king?” and Horatio responds, “As thou art to thyself.” The “irresistible desire for identification” that Derrida recognizes in this opening scene plays out in those first few moments from the hologram’s rise; the focus on Pac’s torso, with his famous THUG LIFE tattoo, both forces the identification process — see, it’s him, you know this body! — and shows us where that identification can take place — precisely on the (Black male) body.

The fetishization of the Black male torso too has a history in hip hop and R&B; the focus of LL Cool J’s “Paradise” video is his body, under the spray of a waterfall, splashing around, for a total of two of the video’s four minutes. Tellingly, LL Cool J shows more skin than his female singing partner, Amerie. Even more directly fetishistic, D’Angelo’s “Untitled (How Does It Feel)”

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(1999) video *only* has his naked body as the focal point. The camera scans up and down, from his smiling and singing face to focus on his abdominal muscles as they produce the breath that makes the sound. Again, the young, lithe, Black body on a black background rearticulates a value system, a recording concert industry that makes money from a process that sexualizes while it fragments, immobilizing one piece of a body by literally denying it legs.

## Queering Hip Hop Temporalities

In their roundtable discussion of queer temporalities in GLQ’s special *Queer Temporalities* issue, Roderick Ferguson, Judith Halberstam, and Carla Freccero animate queer temporality in a way that illuminates how I see hip hop as potentially queering time. Ferguson calls for a palimpsestic, Derridean sense of time, of seeing layers of past meaning in contemporary queer, African American sociological formations (180). This palimpsestic approach to time would illuminate the layers of meaning present in the amplification of a holographic image: a hailing to the past, an effort to reproduce and renegotiate meaning in the present, as well as the reanimation of figures like the ‘gangsta’ or ‘rough rider’ whose historical valence hails from the 1990s. Far from having no meaning now, these figures have *more* meaning, layering reductive representations of impoverished Black American men with a re-animation of old images for new purposes, even while it’s possible that the new purpose is to reinforce the authenticity of an aging Dr. Dre. This palimpsestic understanding of Tupac’s hologram body, which situates itself in a hip hop history that argues both that Tupac was killed by the government and that he is still alive, places the hologram outside of Derrida’s

hauntology, which claims that “nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt” (9). Indeed, while work is taking place over this image, it is not the work of mourning, which is a working-through and, ultimately, a moving forward. The queer temporality of hip hop is both one of constant presence and one of afterness, one that insists on orienting itself both to the present and to always coming after death.

Freccero offers queer time as a relation to historicity “that could account for the affective force of the past in the present, of a desire issuing from another time and placing a demand on the present” (184). This affective force, both the fierce nostalgia for a more authentic “back in the day” and the constantly reiterated faux-mourning process, shows itself in the shock of seeing a dead man’s torso *and* the familiarity of Tupac to a generation for whom he has never been alive. That is, the “affective force of the past in the present” is most evident in the reactions of those fans for whom Tupac has only ever existed in the past tense. This is precisely what makes Tupac’s haunting different from Derrida’s hauntology, for all its illuminations: in comparing Hamlet and Marx, Derrida says, “everything begins by the apparition of a specter. More precisely, by the *waiting* for this apparition” (2). With Tupac’s hologram, there was no waiting. The crowd did not expect his presence, and for some of us, at least, it was shocking. It is worth noting that it was shocking for people who remembered when Tupac was alive; for others, it was mere representation, but a representation that they recognized with the affective force of the past.

But most compelling, I think, about thinking hip hop through a lens of queer temporality is the possibility of what Halberstam calls “a sexual practice whose time has past” (190). Halberstam said, “As someone who sexually identifies as a ‘stone butch,’ I am always surprised to hear that apparently there are no stone butches anymore! People often tell me that stone butch was an identity bound to the 1950s and apparently dependent on a pre-liberation understanding of lesbianism or queerness. Or, now I hear from younger trans folks that stone butchness can be ‘resolved’ by transitioning. So what does it mean to engage in a sexual practice whose time is past?” (190) In this conversation, Halberstam points to what is often presented as a progress narrative of queer time, wherein queerness emerges and is improved, while ‘old’ forms of sexuality are resolved through new, more progressive formations. The “sexual practice whose time has passed” for Halberstam is a queerness associated with a presumed gender binary, and the discomfort is identifying with that practice. Hip hop has been branded as a sexist, misogynistic genre; as a queer woman who loves hip hop, and not just homo hop, I am faced regularly with the question, But how do you listen to this genre that is so negative toward women, and queer folk in general?<sup>[4]</sup>I want to offer that it is by engaging with past sexism that contemporary popular hip hop artists negotiate what it means to identify with a sexual practice whose time is past.

Hip hop's sampling culture brings back dead loved ones, or at least dead pioneers, regularly, but this taking up, like Hegel's *aufheben*, is both a preserving and a cancellation, a negating by taking up and making your own something that belonged to someone else. It is a fetishization, attempting to ossify meaning while also negotiating that meaning, which allows for the possibility of, rather than the guarantee of, new meanings. This simultaneous hero-worship and vexed inheritance can be seen in J. Cole's newest, most successful album, "Born Sinner." Named after a line from one of Biggie's most famous songs, "Juicy," the album slips in and out of Biggie's lyrics and samples even while explicitly pointing to J. Cole's relationship to Nas and Jay-Z. However, it is also an engagement with and acknowledgement of a sexual practice whose time is passing. In J. Cole's opening song, "Villuminati,"

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he hails the original Biggie song, the history of Black American music's use of gospel choirs, and a redemption narrative as the choir sings "I'm a born sinner, but I got better than that". Cole engages with redemption less explicitly as he treats homosexuality later in the song. He raps, "And I don't mean no disrespect whenever I say faggot, okay faggot? Don't be so sensitive. If you wanna get fucked in the ass that's between you and whoever else's dick it is. Pause. Maybe that line was too far. Just a little joke to show how homophobic you are..." I offer this line not because I think it shows that hip hop is no longer homophobic, nor to present J. Cole as a 'progressive' or 'conscious' rapper, although those things may exist. I argue that J. Cole shows ambivalence as he engages precisely with what Halberstam calls "a sexual practice whose time has past." He knows there is such a thing as going too far, and he wants to claim that he means no disrespect as a way of avoiding that 'too far,' but he appears unclear as to what respectful would look like, and falls back on accusing the listener of homophobia, possibly as a pre-emptive defense against the same accusation. Although I would not argue that stone butch lesbian is a thing that no longer exists, I have heard that argument from younger queer and trans folks. I have also seen, particularly with younger hip hop heads, a growing discomfort with the misogyny and sexism that even their favorite 'back in the day' artists represent. Like Halberstam, I'm not sure what it means to identify with, or identify in response to, a sexual practice whose time has past. And I think J. Cole is equally unsure.

In this annotated playlist, I mean to suggest the ways that queering noise is already taking place across hip hop's spectrum, in terms of sexuality, temporality, and bodily representation. We can hear that queering in the ways hip hop uses 'the break' — that highly significant lack, that moment of silence that disrupts the expectations of the listener and makes space for a soloist within the group dynamic. Hip hop is composed of disruptions in time. We can hear echoes of what Ellison asserts as the value of spending time listening to Louis Armstrong, when "[i]nstead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around" (7).

My argument, that hip hop has been provoking questions of sexuality, noise, and representation, isn't to discount the importance of such an investigation; indeed, it shows that investigation's necessity. Similarly, scholars of noise and militarization like Steve Goodman articulate their work in relationship to hip hop and sound studies. Goodman explicitly states he will not undertake "a detailed analysis of the innovative politics of black noise and militarized stance of Public Enemy and the martial arts mythologies of the Wu Tang Clan," which indicates precisely that such a consideration "could fit snugly" into an analysis of the militarization of sound and noise, that such an analysis is necessary. This short annotated playlist argues that the queerness of hip hop's position has to do with its simultaneous place as the revolutionary or radical future of music and its apotheosis (as noise), as savior and disgrace. Hip hop forces us to consider a queering of temporality that takes up a history of Black music in America, 'signifiyin' outside normative race relations, normative sexuality, and normative temporality.

## Notes

1. 'Signifiying' is defined by Kermit E. Campbell as "a way of rendering powerless through language an uncompromising oppressor." It is often linked with what Zora Neale Hurston called "feather-bed resistance," allowing an oppressor to feel like they have gotten hold of someone's mind when actually all they've got is what that person put forward for them to have. This is linked directly to the genre of "Signifying Monkey" stories, a performative genre that Campbell terms "narrative poems... with a twist ending of some sort".
2. This runs the gamut from Son House's "Levee Camp Moan" to Howlin' Wolf's "Little Red Rooster" to Stevie Ray Vaughan's "Texas Flood," among myriad others.
3. Ocean posted a picture to his Tumblr of a text document he had written on an airplane in December of 2011. The document tells the story of his first love, a man with whom things did not work out as he'd wanted, and expresses his gratitude for that first love.  
<http://www.complex.com/music/2012/07/frank-ocean-comes-out-as-bisexual>
4. "Homo hop" is one name given to the nascent and burgeoning genre of hip hop made by and for queer folks. While Frank Ocean is not often included in this category, Big Freedia is.

## Discography

1. [Public Enemy, "Bring the Noise"] <1BringTheNoise.Mp3>
2. [Ma Rainey, "Prove It On Me Blues"] <2ProveItOnMeBlues.mp3>
3. [Frank Ocean, "Thinkin Bout You"] <3ThinkinBoutYou.M4a>
4. [Biggie Smalls, "Life After Death"] <4LifeAfterDeath.mp3>



5. [Sugar Hill Gang, "Rapper's Delight"] <5RappersDelight.mp3>
6. [Tupac Hologram, Dr Dre, and Snoop, "Ride or Die, Coachella 2012"] <6Coachella.mp3>
7. [D'Angelo, "Untitled (How Does It Feel?)"] <7HowDoesItFeel.mp3>
8. [J. Cole, "Villuminati"] <8Villuminati.mp3>

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